



Grant will help recall a place that time forgot

Hunts Mills Amusement Park was one of four such parks in East Providence in the early part of the 20th century. Today, only the park manager's office remains.

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EAST PROVIDENCE -- It's hard to visualize with all the trees.

But a century ago, and even 80 years ago, the place had a very different look and feel. There was a large dance hall, a carousel, shooting galleries and even Japanese Ping-Pong

Today, most city residents aren't aware that the wooded area next to the East Providence Historical Society's headquarters on a 37-acre site in the Hunts Mills area of the Ten Mile River was home to an amusement park.

The site of the former Hunts Mills Amusement Park is about to get more attention, thanks to a \$5,000 grant from the state Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, which the East Providence Historical Society plans to use this summer to restore the park's one remaining vestige: the park manager's office.

Built by the Rumford Baking Co. as entertainment for its own and other employees, Hunts Mills opened in 1905 and lasted 20 years.

Though it was not the fanciest of the four amusement parks in the city at the time, that honor belonged to Vanity Fair -- Hunts Mills was a favorite of many Sunday school groups. It was a place where women and children could and feel safe, unaccompanied by escorts. With its rustic bridges and meandering paths, visitors could find a pleasant place to stroll and watch the river's rapids.

For the more adventurous, there were canoes. And the ballroom, very much like the Alhambra Ballroom at Crescent Park, provided ample space for dancing.

Fire destroyed the ballroom and forced the amusement park to an early end. Given the history, David Kelleher, chairman of the preservation committee for the historical society, says it's no mystery why even longtime residents have difficulty remembering it.

Even the manager's office is no longer at its original location. It was moved years ago next to the water department's pump house, where it was used primarily for the storing and testing of water meters. It became known as the meter house.

In all, says Kelleher, \$7,500 is being earmarked for restoring the outside of the building, \$5,000 from the state and \$2,500 being raised locally.

The interior, he says, is still a long way off.

When the society gets to that phase, he envisions a day when a small room in the house could be set aside to display some of the pictures of the park.

Hunts Mills was a village that belonged to the Massachusetts towns of Rehoboth and Seekonk. When the area was ceded to Rhode Island in 1862, it became part of East Providence.

The land belonged to the Hunt family, whose ancestor, Peter Hunt, was one of Seekonk's settlers. Because of the location along the rapids, the property was home to a saw mill, a grist mill and a mill which was used to process and thicken cloth.

The prosperity of the enterprise allowed Lt. John Hunt, the great-grandson of Peter Hunt, to build a mansion near the river in 1750, the current headquarters of the historical society.

Kelleher notes that besides Hunts Mills, East Providence was home to other amusement parks in the early 20th century: Crescent Park; Vanity Fair, on Pawtucket Avenue near what is the Silver Spring golf course; and Brighton Heights, on Pawtucket Avenue across from St. Mary Academy-Bay View.

Vanity Fair was the largest and glitziest. However, its enormous number of lights proved its undoing.

To meet the cost of electricity, the park charged admission. Because it was the only park in the city that did, it had trouble attracting patrons and went bankrupt in 1912, just two years after it opened.

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